

# The Schismatic Bully

From: <http://frjakestopsttheworld.blogspot.com/2008/02/schismatic-bully.html>

As the Instruments of Schism continue to grind their way through the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, the nature and extent of the damage are being revealed. I write with deep concern for those in embattled parishes and dioceses who are struggling to save their church homes or beginning to pick up the pieces and rebuild.

Episcopalians in some critically affected areas are urgently requesting help from within and outside their dioceses. I believe that in some instances valuable help might come from consultants who are familiar with the dynamics and effects of bullying in organizations and workplaces, and who understand the social impact of certain kinds of personality disorders. This is not my area of expertise, but I had to educate myself about it some years ago when I had a couple of therapy clients and a close family member who were significantly impacted by workplace bullying. I've been hoping that someone with more experience or credentials would weigh in on the topic, but since they haven't, I will put in my non-specialist two cents' worth.

We know that many factors have contributed to the current movement to split the Church and create some form of international disciplinary authority for Anglicanism. Disagreements about doctrine and governance, differences in cultural practices and beliefs, personal ambition, power struggles, subversion and funding from outside parties, reverberations from colonial and missionary history, and other causes have been discussed at great length. What I haven't seen is much attention to psychological factors, and specifically to the psychology of bullying. Where bizarre thinking and behavior have been observed in a particular place over a period of many years, leading to a catastrophic outcome, the possibility should be considered that a critical factor in the entire drama has been the success of a disordered individual in gaining a position of power and using it to play out on a grand scale his own internal need to split the world into pure and impure, good and evil, true and false, faithful and treasonous, saved and damned, orthodox and apostate/heretical.

A skilled bully is fully capable of wrecking the health of people he works with (especially in a supervisory capacity) and of destroying or disabling the organization he works for or oversees. There are degrees of bullying, but the most serious kind (which concerns me here) is an expression of certain personality types and disorders. This kind of bully typically struggles against feelings of being empty and worthless (thus is profoundly envious of other people's capabilities and self-esteem). His inner world is characterized by a severe split between these extreme negative emotions and thoughts and the need to see the self as positive, even ideal. (The highly polarized world view supported by extreme evangelicalism would obviously be congenial to such a person.) He projects his intense self-destructive impulses onto others and thus believes himself to be an innocent victim under constant threat. Any disagreement with his views or questioning of his actions is interpreted as persecution. His destructive actions toward others are, in his mind, justified by this perceived danger to himself. His talents and charisma are systematically and relentlessly deployed in a calculated effort to gain power over those around him and displace his intolerable inner conflict and negativity onto the environment.

Organizations (the business office, the church, the nonprofit corporation) provide the bully with

an inviting container for his disordered projections and an arena in which he can safely play out his inner battles, which might otherwise destroy him.

Those around him must be either duped or intimidated into complying with his program, or else expelled. The bully has a thousand ways of breaking people down to the point where they either submit or leave: ridicule, isolation/exclusion, shaming, threats, lying, character assassination, ill-founded or excessive criticism, constantly changing the rules and shifting the goalposts, not stating what is expected and then punishing people for failing to meet expectations, playing people off against each other, and on and on. The aim is to eliminate anyone whose competency would show up the bully's limitations or reveal his machinations, and to keep everyone else under tight control.

The bully uses the rules and customs of the organization to defeat their own purposes. He is extremely hard to fire or even correct or restrain because he familiarizes himself with the laws and policies that affect his situation and manipulates them so cleverly that they end up scarcely more effective than a pile of shredded waste paper. In his mission of control-and-destroy, he counts on other people's trusting nature, their essential decency and fairness and their inclination to play by the rules, think and debate logically, negotiate in good faith, and give each other (and him) the benefit of the doubt. Having created a chaotic situation in which the rules cannot effectively be mobilized to defend individuals or restore the organization to healthy functioning, he punishes and attempts to induce guilt in those who try to undertake any creative or restorative action. Efforts to reduce harm or avert disaster are thus blunted or driven underground.

While he is constantly attempting to put others in their place, drawing boundaries that incorporate some and exclude others, the bully's psychological boundaries are so unstable that he recognizes no limits to his own actions or sphere of influence. He keeps others off balance by continually shifting the boundaries, redefining the meanings of words, changing the mission statement, and reinterpreting the rules to mean whatever serves his purposes at the moment. Knowledge of the system (including ambiguities and gaps in the law, which never anticipated the kind of subversion he is attempting) enables him to play for time, advancing his agenda while others are busy conscientiously consulting the canons and trying their best to follow protocol and procedure.

A culture of bullying may develop. Like abuse in families, bullying in organizations can become systemic. The bully in a position of power surrounds himself with people he can rely on to bully those beneath them, keeping the foot soldiers or pew-sitters in line.

Bullies often bring out the worst in people and aggravate any existing weaknesses and problems in organizations. What is worse, they use the virtues and strengths of people and organizations to undermine them. Through the careful use of propaganda, a highly-placed bully strives to persuade his constituents or employees that the destruction and division being wrought are for their benefit and reflect the organization's highest purposes (e.g., securing a 'safe' place for the souls of orthodox believers). It is, in reality, never about them; yet their souls and bodies, their time and devotion and talent, along with all the other assets of the organization, will be

systematically exploited for the purposes of the campaign. Whether they are literate or uninformed, emotionally healthy or neurotic, fearful or trusting, able to tolerate divergent opinions or troubled by them – each member, and all of his or her capabilities, attitudes, weaknesses and strengths are fair game for the schism machine. All will be drawn into the game of ‘separating the sheep from the goats’. Rules and procedures will be manipulated so that in many situations no one has any really good options for open, informed and positive action. The bully’s blame machine and polarization dynamics increasingly infect the entire community.

Eventually the inner pathology of the bully may dominate or even become embodied in the organization. The bully has achieved victory when his internal splits, his paranoia, his lack of a core positive identity, his boundary issues, his negativity and instability have been successfully displaced and given concrete form outside himself. The membership becomes severely polarized and alienated; the organization may either fragment or become so damaged as to have to shut down. Those left on the ground typically feel worthless, impotent, tainted, disorganized, incompetent, empty and exhausted. They find it very hard to recover mutual trust and to mobilize the legal and administrative resources to salvage the organization so that it can get back to its original mission.

There are serious health implications for the individuals and the organization that have suffered this kind of treatment. It is common for victims of bullying to become physically ill and suffer long-lasting or permanent psychological harm.

Where bullying has broken down an organization, harmed individuals and shattered relationships, an important first step in the healing process is to recognize that this is not a ‘normal’ situation of people behaving badly (for which they could ask forgiveness and learn to do better), or an ordinary (though serious) disagreement (about which there could be further study and negotiation); nor is it mainly a matter of inept administration or inadequate application of law or policy. The survivors first need to realize that they have been left holding the bag of a serious disease which is not itself communicable, yet which damages the mental, physical and spiritual health of all those it touches.

The full extent of the damage and pain now have to be brought out into the open. Anger and regret must be expressed, and losses mourned. Individuals and working groups will have to face their own weaknesses and acknowledge any contributions they may have made to the present debacle. People will have to come to grips with the ways in which bullying has messed with their heads, twisted their behavior, exploited their vulnerabilities, and even used their virtues to set them against their own best interests and isolate them from their fellows.

Anglicanism itself with its Broad Church tradition is vulnerable to exploitation by this kind of illness. This is not a reason to give up our tradition. Nor should individuals doubt their own gifts, whatever they may be, which set them up for being exploited in this situation. Like the bodies and souls of rape victims (and I choose this analogy advisedly), they must be healed and blessed and brought back into the community.

I submit, in fact, that the Anglican way, tolerant and inclusive, embracing such a broad range of theological views and liturgical styles, is a model of good mental and spiritual health. Where we see that model under attack, we should be suspicious. When new “Instruments of Unity”, or new powers for the existing Instruments, are proposed for our Communion, we should check for the hidden knives of schism beneath the purple robes. Wherever police powers are sought to regulate behavior in far-off places; wherever the urgent cry goes up to expel or punish heresy; wherever elaborate, self-contradictory, impossible-to-implement measures for defining who is in and who is out are urged upon us, we should suspect the busy hands of the bully behind it all.

Prayers for the healing of our Church.

Mary Clara  
February 7, 2008